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Community PLANNING



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COMMUNITY PLANNING

Its Implications and Objectives

by

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Introduction:

Recently an executive of one of our municipalities said: "I don't know anything about community planning but I imagine that it would include a spring cleanup campaign". Perhaps he had something. At any rate too many people know too little about it.

Not long ago a dentist wrote saying that the local Board of Trade was interested and would like information on tree planting. Their concept was beautification. Recently a town clerk sought advice on the location of a community hall; a surveyor requested criticism of a proposed subdivision; a village secretary wanted information on the setting up of a fire district. These are every day occurrences in my office.

Sometimes I wonder whether or not the advice given is worth the effort. Several years ago I suggested the use of a vacant lot owned by the municipality, to eliminate a dangerous street intersection. The lot was set aside for this purpose but at a later date the council sold it for a gas station. There have been numerous accidents at this intersection.

A few months ago there appeared in one of our weekly newspapers an item to the effect that a request to the council for the setting aside of two vacant tax title lots in a residence area for a children's playground had been refused. The reason given was that in the event of sale there was potential tax return. Evidently the welfare of the children was of minor importance.

During the past ten years the Department of Municipal Affairs through The Municipal Tax Titles Act has authorized the issue of title, free of charge under The Land Titles Act, to over 35,000 vacant tax sale and tax lien lots of low potential value in both urban and rural areas. Some municipalities have acted wisely and reverted potential farm lands to acreage. Others, not so wise, have disposed of lots in wholesale fashion, forgetting that there are streets and lanes. Still others have sold lots in scattered areas, only to find themselves in the unfortunate position of being unable to provide local services except at the expense of the ratepayers at large. The net result is a condition of involved confusion.

The most recent case of imprudent community development coming to my attention is that of a residential area in one of our larger urban centres where, because of rapid growth since the war, a church site was desired. Two years ago there were several hundred vacant lots, most of them owned by the municipality and many of them potential church sites. Now there are none and the best that could be done was to choose a not too satisfactory site on the fringe of development.

From the foregoing it will be apparent that greater vigilance in both urban and rural development is necessary. That signifies planning for the future—community planning—of which there is a striking lack of knowledge. Some think that proper urban and rural development is attainable through attacking each problem on its own merits. Others, having observed the result of this piecemeal approach, hold that as the whole is made of its several parts, these through the exercise of foresight, should be suitably related. For the most part though, we are apt, in our zeal to place our immediate portion of the world on its feet, to think in terms of the present, forgetting that the present was at one time the future and that mistakes now evident could have been avoided.

The Logic of Planning:

Essentially a planning conscious community is one that, inspired by civic pride, thinks wisely in terms of the future and proceeds to formulate a policy of development, the corner-stone of which is the greatest good to all the people.

Obviously the physical structure of a community cannot be changed overnight, but, with constant vigilance applied through a well thought out policy of development, often styled "The Official Plan", a community re-born may be the result. Perhaps the best illustration of the operative effect of such a plan is that of pressure applied to a stick of sealing wax. Dealt a sharp blow—it shatters; slowly applied, it can be fashioned to any reasonable pattern.

The average life of a building is upwards of twenty-five years, indicating that within this period portions of the community now built may be rebuilt. Hence, carrying out a plan does not of necessity commence with bond issues to cover improvements on a grand scale but it does permit of the introduction of desirable changes at the most opportune time and the allotment of expenditures in such a way that each improvement will represent a part of a definite objective.

Locking the door after the horse is stolen is neither sensible nor economical; neither is it good business to wait until uses of land mutually injurious are all jumbled together, until buildings are crowded without regard to public health or street capacities, or until fair opportunities for acquiring land for necessary streets, parks or playgrounds are lost, often irretrievably, through the haphazard spread of private enterprise.

The Scope of Community Planning:

From what I have said it will be apparent that the objective of Community Planning is the systematic bringing about of order within the community; and concerns itself with such matters as street widths and locations, land use distribution, sites for educational and other public buildings and, generally, the physical development of the community. All this is foreseen in Section 9 of The Community Planning Act, which provides that where the plan is comprehensive it may be styled the Official Plan.

A program of development, covering a period of several years, should be set out and the order of importance of the various projects indicated. One of the benefits of such a program is that each year's appropriation can be properly applied. In this respect Section 12 of the Act provides:

"12. The adoption by the council of a community planning scheme shall not commit the council to undertake any of the projects therein suggested or outlined, but shall prevent the undertaking by the council of any public improvements within the scope of the official plan or scheme in any manner inconsistent therewith or at variance therefrom."

Briefly it is the purpose of the Act to provide an official method of creating a long term policy of development.

Land Use:

Living resolves itself into two general activities, **home** and **work**, with a third, more or less interwoven with these two, of **recreation**. Hence the use and development of land within the community should be divided broadly into the corresponding basic classifications, subdivided, for residence, according to the desirable degree of land occupancy with related facilities and, for work, according to the nature of the occupation—generally into manufacture and distribution, with blended provision for recreation.

The Street System:

Streets constitute the framework of the community and, in consequence, are of prime importance. In so far as traffic is concerned they are comparable to the arteries of the human body. If improperly laid out they may, and frequently do, cause serious and costly congestion or accident. According to the nature of the traffic they are classable as major streets, to accommodate volume of traffic, and minor streets, to accommodate local traffic and to serve as feeders to the main lines of traffic.

Experience has shown that, where through traffic is carried into a business district there is, in addition to greater accident tendency, actual increase in the rate of street wear. Hence it is considered good practice to so lay out main thoroughfares that, where through traffic must enter the community, it may pass around rather than through the business area.

A proper street plan, therefore, in addition to showing the major thoroughfare system and its connections with the surrounding district, will show the changes necessary to create an efficient street system. In particular it will indicate the variations in existing streets either in width or direction necessary to achieve the desired objective.

Parks and Playgrounds:

Many communities have insufficient playground space, thus compelling children to play on the streets or become trespassers. Where these conditions prevail, there is a tendency for play activities

to take the form of "gangs" whose desire for excitement leads to the destruction of property. Few children of public school age will attend a playground distant more than one-quarter of a mile from home and few boys and girls of high school age more than three quarters of a mile. This is fundamental to the design of a playground system.

A good lawn around the home is the best place for small children but playgrounds for older children and athletic fields and neighborhood parks for adults are essential and, if not provided, their lack is felt even though there be no protest. A large park, however desirable, is not a substitute for small informal parks and open spaces so distributed as to be convenient to those people who need ready access to grass, trees and open spaces.

In any event, public recreation is necessary for the promotion of community health and happiness, and for these reasons provision for it belongs to a good plan. Moreover, by the adoption of a well designed plan of a system of parks and playgrounds the proper location of land for these purposes is assured; but action on the plan should not be delayed till the possibilities of acquiring the necessary lands are exhausted or beyond the financial ability of the municipality.

Public Buildings:

The site locations of schools, community halls, hospitals, municipal and other public buildings are important. Each type of building, because of its intended use, is subject to diverse rules beyond the scope of this discussion; suffice it that, while a hospital requires an area of relative quiet, a school should be so located as to cause as few children as possible to cross a highway or a busy street. Community halls, on the other hand, are amenable to the type of area to be served,—the rural hamlet, the smaller self governing urban municipality and the neighborhood unit of the city.

The Civic Centre:

The grouping of public and semi-public buildings, including municipal administration, on adjacent sites is in the public interest, not only from the point of view of appearance but to provide better service. The desirable location to best serve the public is near but not within the business centre which actually is the true civic centre.

Care, however, should be exercised that functional relationship of grouped buildings be uppermost. Briefly the site should be so selected that grouping may include buildings normally belonging to or forming part of the business centre, with sufficient open space to provide adequate view and so located as to contribute to the good appearance of the business centre.

Zoning:

No comprehensive planning scheme would be complete without a bylaw forbidding the carrying on of activities other than those belonging to the respective districts—commonly styled a zoning bylaw. In addition to promoting the welfare of the community it protects owners from unnecessary loss of property values arising from the

intrusion of inharmonious uses of property. It provides for the health of the citizens by requiring proper open spaces about buildings, avoids waste in the civic physique caused by misplaced building construction, assists materially in obtaining equity in assessment values as a base for taxation and, generally, leads to a more happy and contented community. Briefly the philosophy of zoning is that of the Golden Rule.

In addition to use control it is customary to guard against land overloading by restricting the permissible bulk of buildings in relation to street widths and site areas. A street system has its limitations in the amount of traffic it can carry. Consequently, without controlling the density of building development, the planner cannot design an adequate street system. He is much in the same position as an engineer or an architect attempting to design a structure without knowledge of its intended use or desired capacity.

Perhaps at this point a note of warning is in order. Some municipalities, because of lack of courage to spend money to do a thorough research job provide several times the business frontage required to accommodate their probable ultimate population. This is known as over zoning. Its effect is to create an area of mixed development, heavily overtaxed as to residence and with slowly depreciating property values. The ultimate cost to the municipality is always a great deal more than the money first saved in doing a cheap rush job.

Control of Subdivision:

Unfortunately we have become so accustomed to the grid pattern of subdivision that most of us are incapable of thinking in terms other than that a straight line is the shortest distance between two points. Too little attention is paid to topography and practically none to the amenities of community life, particularly as related to residence use. All too often the absorbing thought of the subdivider is in terms of monetary gain, forgetting that the public has a very real interest. As a means of curbing these propensities Saskatchewan for many years has controlled land subdivision through minimum requirements for street and lot widths and locations but no regulation however efficient can guarantee that land will be subdivided to the greatest advantage. This is attainable only through a well designed plan of future development.

Organization for Community Planning:

The best method so far devised of effecting community planning is to set up, by bylaw*, of the council, a local organization of from three to nine members, termed a community planning committee, charged with the responsibility of creating a plan and provided with sufficient funds to do the job. Usually the membership of a committee is composed of representative citizens serving without pay, including a member of the council and an executive officer of the municipality. In any event the citizen members should be in the majority.

* A suggested form of bylaw will be supplied on application to The Community Planning Branch, Department of Municipal Affairs, Regina.

Two types of committees are anticipated in Section 7 of The Community Planning Act, one temporary and the other permanent. The temporary committee, having been given a particular planning job, would, when the task is completed, cease to operate. The long term committee, which must be on an annual rotation basis, may also be given a planning job but would, on completion, continue in an advisory capacity.

One of the reasons for the committee basis of operation is the wide coverage of the subject. Dipping into the respective fields of law, engineering, architecture and the related professions, to say nothing of required familiarity with economics, sociology, finance and public relations, it is of little wonder that all these qualifications are not to be found in one person. For the smaller community a live committee working in co-operation with the Community Planning Branch of the Department of Municipal Affairs should be able to solve most of its problems; but for the larger community, staff organization is essential.

Ordinarily the main features of a plan will remain constant but, with development, changes will be necessary. It should then be the duty of the committee to keep the plan up to date and to inform the public of its status. A further duty should be to determine or suggest to the council how best the financial resources of the municipality may be used to attain the objective of the plan. These added duties are assignable only to a permanent committee, the membership of which, as has been said, is on a rotating or consecutive appointment basis. The actual responsibility of carrying out the plan rests with the council and the executive officers of the municipality, whose duty it is to acquire any necessary lands and to effect the construction of public works.

Perhaps at this point it should be said that, in conformity with modern planning practice, The Community Planning Act was amended at the 1946 session of the Legislature providing for the setting up of permanent local Boards with administrative authority. Usually this is confined to the granting of relief from zoning requirements where, in individual cases, there may be hardship. But here it should be cautioned that any exception made must be in harmony with the general intention of the bylaw. This automatically precludes authorization of changes in land use, which may be done only by amending the bylaw.

The Need of Greater Foresight:

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to comprehensive planning is the failure of the public to appreciate and understand its many benefits. Surveys of losses and wastes attributable to lack of planning have shown that the most loudly proclaimed arise from traffic congestion but the most wanton are due to scattered changes in property use. A portion of a dwelling is converted to a small shop, an old dwelling to a small laundry. Immediately a spirit of restlessness is introduced. Adjoining home owners vacate or sell, often at a loss. Thus is commenced a gradual lowering of property values.

To be without a general policy of development or to have an official plan that may be altered without notice is to slowly undermine the security back of property investment. The plan, when adopted, should become an accepted pattern for a better community —one that may not be changed upon caprice to meet selfish interests but whose largeness of purpose must be preserved for the good of all the people. To pursue any other ideal is to invite risk of loss from economic waste and reflected adverse tax rates.

No community is too small or too well established to do nothing about it and strict adherence to a definite policy over a period of years will always bring results. If that policy be in the form of an official plan of the community as it ought to be, the ultimate result will be a well proportioned community of balanced functions and protected values, pleasing to the eye and satisfying to the people.

Community planning is not a frill dealing with trees, flowers and grass plots. It is a major process, recognized as such by leaders of thought as offering a dependable background for the investment of public funds. It consists of collecting facts, analyzing them and setting up a common sense program with "first things first!"